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Informed Questions on Malaysia

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Informed Questions on Malaysia

Malaysia's Vision.

While Indonesia gets the attention of policy makers on South East (SE) Asia because of its size and population, Malaysia has increasingly been courted as an example of an Islamic country that is moderate and progressive. This is despite the vitriolic, anti-west outbursts of Dr Mahathir, its controversial Prime Minister of 22 years, who has set the objective of Malaysia becoming a fully developed country by the year 2020. He envisions Malaysia becoming a strong and modern Islamic country, and has disparaged the Muslim world for being weak as a result of its backward policies. At the 2002 World Economic Forum in New York, he said, "If today Islam is perceived to be a religion of backward, violent and irrational people, it is not because of Islam itself as a faith and a way of life. It is because Muslims have deviated from the fundamentals of Islam, have abused the teachings to justify their personal greed and ambition." [1] Yet, Dr Mahathir is not afraid to attack the West. At the recent Non-Aligned Summit in Kuala Lumpur in Feb 2003, he said that powerful countries "no longer respect borders, international laws or simple values...the expression of this trait invariably involves injustice and oppression of other origins and colors." He concluded that, "it is no longer a war against terrorism. It is in fact a war to dominate the world." [2]

What is Malaysia's vision of its place in SE Asia, and in the Muslim world? Does it see itself as a model for other Islamic countries to follow? Can other Islamic countries replicate its relative success since its independence in 1957?

The Secular-Religious Divide.

Under Malaysia's constitution, Islam is the official religion but government institutions must remain secular. The first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, had said, "The Constitution must be respected and adhered to. There have been attempts by some people who tried to introduce religious laws and morality laws. This cannot be allowed. The country has a multi-racial population with various beliefs. Malaysia must continue as a secular State." [3] The ruling National Front coalition is made up of several race-based parties. The secular Malay party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), dominates the coalition and has enjoyed overwhelming support from Malays since independence. However, in the 1999 national elections, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), made significant gains and captured two of the country's 13 states, Kelantan and Terengganu, in the Malay heartland. The Malays are divided between secular nationalists and Muslim fundamentalists, who want to see the introduction of Islamic law.

What appeals more to the Malay, Malay nationalism or Islamic fundamentalism? Is there a conflict between the desire to become a modern Malay country and a good Muslim society?

Meeting the PAS Challenge.

PAS is attempting to introduce *Hudud* laws in Kelantan and Trengganu. These laws include punishments such as death by stoning for adultery. There are fears that Malaysia will gradually become an intolerant Islamic state in which Sharia laws would be imposed on non-Muslims. Dr Mahathir said in parliament on April 2001 that he would resist efforts by PAS to set up an Islamic State. However, as a possible reaction to the growing PAS challenge, he declared that Malaysia is already an Islamic state. In reaction to criticism that this contradicted the Constitution, Dr Mahathir merely rebutted, “When I say that Malaysia is an Islamic state, there is no reason for a controversy as I am merely stating a fact that has been accepted by all, including the non-Muslim citizens in the country.”[4]

What does Mahathir mean by “Malaysia is an Islamic nation”? Can this statement be considered a violation of Malaysia’s constitution? To what extent is it a political ploy to regain the support of Malays? What is the government’s plan to win the fight against Muslim fundamentalism? Will we see a gradual Islamisation of Malaysian politics as UMNO attempts to stave off the PAS challenge?

Race and Politics.

Dr Mahathir’s statement that Malaysia is an Islamic country is not likely to resonate well with the 40% of the population that do not profess the religion. While UMNO attempts to win back Malay support, it has to ensure that it does not alienate the non-Muslims. In the last elections, many UMNO candidates survived the PAS onslaught only with the help of non-Muslim support. On the other hand, it is politically untenable for a party that champions Malay rights to remain in power only with the help of non-Malays. In the long

run, it has to win back popular Malay support, especially as demographically, Malays will become greater percentage of population.

Can UMNO always count on the support of the non-Muslim population? Will the growing affluence of Malays persuade them to reject the fundamentalist appeal of PAS? How will Malaysia achieve the delicate balance between winning the Malay ground, while not alienating the non-Muslim population?

Affirmative Action or Racial Discrimination?

Malaysia was one of the most vociferous voices condemning apartheid in South Africa. Yet, since independence, Malaysian politics was dominated by one theme – establishing and maintaining Malay supremacy over the other races. The British were quite happy to hand over power to a Malay-dominated political system as they had been battling communist guerillas, which were largely ethnic Chinese, since 1948. Under the Malaysian constitution, the indigenous races, “bumiputras” – literally, “sons of the land”, have “special rights” over the “immigrant races”, mostly ethnic Chinese and Indians. The Asian Migrants Conference held in Bangkok in July 2001 said in a statement that nations should be “accountable for discriminatory policies and practices: which uses racial/religious identification in national identity cards and official government documents, that promotes greater racial and religious segregation and or discrimination as in Malaysia.” [7]

How does Malaysia reconcile its reputation as a champion for the oppressed of the world with its own racial discrimination policies? Even if it justifies racial discrimination as affirmative action, will the majority Malays who benefit from it ever

allow the playing field to be leveled one day? What protection do the minorities have against abuses and unfair practices?

Malaysia's Role in GWOT.

In the Global War On Terror (GWOT), Malaysia is seen as an ideological and geographical bulwark against the spread of Islamic radicalism in SE Asia. The GWOT has given the secular government an opportunity to crack down on its main rival, PAS. Shortly after arresting scores of alleged terrorists under its Internal Security Act, the son of the PAS leader was also hauled in for plotting to set up a pan-SE Asian Islamic state. Suddenly, the leader best known for bashing the West has become its ally. President Bush welcomed Dr Mahathir warmly in May 2002 for his first visit since 1994. Laying out the groundwork before the visit, the Defence Minister, Najib Razak waxed lyrical about Malaysia's special relationship with the US in a talk entitled "US-Malaysian Defense Cooperation: A solid success story", at the Heritage Foundation. He portrayed Dr Mahathir as Islam's moderate statesman and anti-terror warrior, and proclaimed that, "Malaysia is resolute and steadfast in fighting all forms of terrorism and is committed in supporting the global war against terrorism." [5]

What is the effect of the Malaysian government's stance in the GWOT on the Malay-Muslim majority? Will it serve to unite the Malays behind UMNO, or will it deepen the secular-religious divide within the Malay majority? Is the government exploiting the GWOT to crack down on its political rivals? Will the government's support of the US-led GWOT backfire?

Political Succession.

Dr Mahathir has announced that he will step down in Oct 2003 after 23 years at the helm. Ostensibly, he was to have handed over to his popular deputy Anwar Ibrahim before the last election, but ended up jailing him instead on highly suspect corruption and homosexual charges. His designated successor, Abdullah Badawi is affable and well liked but may not be strong enough to hold off other ambitious politicians such as Najib Razak, the Defense Minister. There are rumors that Dr Mahathir may stay on in some official capacity in order to protect his family and his business cronies with whom he has forged a personal relationship since becoming PM in 1981.

Will we see a smooth transition of power? What is the likely role Dr Mahathir after he officially steps down? Will he adopt a Senior Minister position akin to Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore? To what extent will this be motivated by his desire to see through a smooth transition, or his fear that Anwar Ibrahim may rise again to wreak revenge on his family and his cronies?

US Military Presence in SE Asia.

Malaysia has been a vocal proponent of the concept of ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Friendship and Neutrality) for SE Asia. The Malaysian DPM, Abdullah Badawi, had said that although China will grow into a world great power, the “China Threat” Theory is an extremely arbitrary view. He believed that China would not follow in the footsteps of the USSR. [6] However, it is likely that Malaysia is concerned about China’s claims on huge swaths of the South China Sea, stretching all the way to waters off Malaysia.

Does Malaysia support the presence of US forces in SE Asia? What is the Malaysian view towards the military presence of other powers, especially China, in SE Asia? What is Malaysia's perception of its biggest threat? Does Malaysia see a resurgent China as a threat given its racial politics?

Economic Competition from China.

On tour through SE Asia in June 2002, US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick advocated that ASEAN would stand a better chance of surviving the Chinese monolith by working together as an integrated group rather than individual players. There are hopes that the economic threat of China will foster greater cooperation among ASEAN members. But China's rapid growth may not be seen as threat to ASEAN economies. Malaysia has seen its exports to China grow by 50%, which has helped to pick up the slack from slower US growth. It is instructive that ASEAN has agreed to trade talks with China even though internecine bickering among members has held up its own ASEAN Free Trade Zone. For example, Malaysia refused to lower its tariff on car imports in order to protect its "national car", the Proton. This hurt its northern neighbor, Thailand, which is home to many European, Japanese and American car manufacturers. [8]

Does Malaysia see China as an economic threat or opportunity? What is Malaysia's economic strategy to deal with rising competition with China? Does it believe that ASEAN should sort out its own free trade agreement before negotiating one with China?

The NEP and Vision 2020.

Under the New Economic Policy (NEP) implemented after the racial riots in 1969, which increased Malay participation in the economy through preferential treatment and quotas, the Malays have dramatically increased their share of economic wealth, mostly through state-owned monopolies and revenues from the national oil company, Petronas. However, as Malaysia industrializes and competes with more developed economies, it realizes that its racially discriminatory policies may have cocooned the Malays and made them uncompetitive. The gap between the Malays and the non-Malays has in fact widened.

In Dr Mahathir's own words, as he inveighed against the loss of Malay support after the 1999 elections, "The success of the NEP in bringing up the Malays to a higher level of development has also brought about a change in the character of the Malays. They think that they no longer need to work hard as they will always be dominant and will always succeed in Malaysia...This new attitude will result in the failure of our affirmative action to help the Malays catch up with the other races and they may once again become the deprived in their own country." [9]

Does the NEP ultimately help the Malays in the long run, or will it only benefit the minority of Malays who are politically connected? Is it an obstacle towards Malaysia achieving developed country status under its Vision 2020? Is Malaysia prepared to dismantle racial discrimination in order to achieve its economic goals?

Malaysia-Singapore Relations.

Malaysia takes a rather hard attitude towards its small southern neighbor, Singapore. Dr Mahathir said recently that, "There are many ways to skin a cat, and to skin Singapore, there are also many ways." [10] Indeed, he has made use of many bilateral issues to

squeeze Singapore, particularly over the supply of water, which was provided for under the Separation Agreement. Although he has a well-deserved reputation for plain speaking, Dr Mahathir reserves his harshest words for Singapore. The Malaysians still bemoan the “loss” of Singapore. What Noor Azam, the former political secretary to Dr Mahathir said recently perhaps revealed the angst that the Malay leadership still feel: “Singapore was surrendered to Lee Kuan Yew...this is not a crime but a major political mistake of Tunku Abdul Rahman which is difficult to forgive.” [11]

Is Singapore the one factor that unites the Malays, both secular and religious? Is it consequently a convenient whipping boy to unite the Malays for domestic reasons? Do the constant verbal attacks on Singapore reflect a deep-seated angst at the “loss” of Singapore? Alternatively, is it because the relative success of Singapore’s merit-based system represents an affront, or more seriously, a threat to the Malaysian political system, in that it exposes the failings of a system based on racial discrimination?

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